

IN THE CROSSHAIRS: HOW SYSTEMIC RACISM COMPELLED INTERSTATE
DEVELOPMENT THROUGH BLACK NEIGHBORHOODS

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I present this thesis in two parts. The first is composed of a 35:41-minute documentary film entitled *In the Crosshairs: how systemic racism compelled interstate development through Black neighborhoods*. Accompanying it is this written essay that outlines my position and provides citations linking evidence to argument. Each component serves a different master. While the essay is intended for an academic reader, the film is intended for a general audience. Each component advances the argument.

As a result of systemic racism, minority neighborhoods in Indianapolis have been devalued over time and, therefore, their residents have been left disproportionately vulnerable to displacement from federal interstate highway construction. They were vulnerable because their property was assessed as less valuable than surrounding land. Also, they lacked the political clout to resist “urban development”. Furthermore, their vulnerability was socially constructed.

It never occurred to me that my place in society was arranged to my advantage. I didn’t feel advantaged in any way. Everybody I knew was like me or better than me, it seemed. As I matured, I learned that history is subjective and my world is only a small slice of history. I had never considered my *whiteness* an advantage. In truth, my situation has been shaped by a myriad of forces that were socially constructed.

I discovered that the definition of “white” is fluid but, throughout history, has had an enormous impact on how people are treated. The following is a deep dive into what I

discovered when I examined only one aspect of how race impacted the advantages I enjoyed simply because my parents were deemed sufficiently “white.”

Philip V. Scarpino, Ph.D., Chair

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Introduction

Sometime between late February and late July of 1973, Robert C. Braun, the Executive Director of Indiana Landmarks (then the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana), received an alarming phone call. On the other end of the line was Marty Hayes at the Indiana Highway Commission. “I’ve got some very bad news for you,” Hayes said, “and I thought it better to tell you personally than to write it in a cold letter that would shock you.” Hayes went on to tell Braun that the Morris-Butler House would need to be razed to make room for the new federal interstate highway system. “I know what the house means to you over there, but it can’t stand in the way of progress,” Hayes stated.¹ Braun was shocked all the same.

The Morris-Butler House had indeed been important to the still young historic preservation organization. Built in 1864, the house was the first historic restoration of Indiana Landmarks and had long been the favorite project of Eli Lilly Jr., one of the wealthiest men in the world at the time and a critical supporter of Indiana Landmarks. For decades, it has been rumored that Lilly, hearing of the threat, intervened to have the route of the interstate adjusted south to save his beloved building. However, like most rumors, the story is not entirely accurate. What really happened was as follows. Quite alarmed by Hayes’ declaration, Braun placed an urgent phone call to Bill Murtagh, the Keeper of the National Register of Historic Places in Washington, D.C. Much to Braun’s relief, Murtagh was not concerned. Murtagh contacted Hayes and asked him if he was planning on using any federal money to build this interstate highway. When he stated that he was,

¹ Interview, Wendy Scott Perkins, public history graduate student, IUPUI, with Robert C. Braun, Executive Director, January 22, 1999, transcript. Transcript located in the library of the state headquarters of Indiana Landmarks, 1201 Central Ave. Indianapolis, Indiana 46202. Hereafter cited as Interview, Perkins with Braun.

Murtagh then educated Hayes on the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 [especially section 106], which was established to address this very circumstance. Murtagh told Hayes that he needed to find an alternate route because the Morris-Butler House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and federal funds would cease when the highway reached its doorstep.² In the end, the Indiana Highway Commission rerouted its interstate to just south of the Morris-Butler House. The Morris-Butler house was saved because it was appreciated by people with influence who knew how to exercise the levers of power to preserve and safeguard it.³ Not everyone threatened by the construction of the interstate understood how to work the system so skillfully and in their favor.

A dozen years earlier, in 1961, a group of African Americans on the northwest side of Indianapolis, hearing that the new interstate was planned to be routed straight through their neighborhood, formed a group to resist that plan, the Hubbard Center Civic League. They protested vigorously at numerous public hearings, but their voices went unheard. Their neighborhood was eventually sliced in half by the new federal interstate

² Interview, Perkins with Braun. Braun's account of these events was recorded decades after and do not accurately reflect the procedural steps that occur when a building on the National Register of Historic Places is threatened by a federally funded or licensed project. Braun could have initiated a Section 106 Review regarding the threat to the Morris-Butler House, which would have launched an evaluation of the impact of interstate construction to the house. There are several possible outcomes to a Section 106 Review; the federal government may have pulled funding for the interstate project, they may have ordered the house to be dismantled and preserved, or they may have approved its demolition. Bill Murtagh was intimately familiar with this process. The author went to great lengths to determine if a 106 review had ever been done on the stretch of I-65 that encompassed the Morris-Butler House. The question was put to rest on August 17th, 2018 when a representative from the Indiana DNR Historic Preservation and Archeology Dept. revealed that no Section 106 reviews were conducted in Indiana prior to 1980. This statement by Jeannie Regan-Dinius was documented by the author and witnessed by Dr. Philip Scarpino, the director of Public History at IUPUI.

³ Many beautiful homes just south of 12th street were not saved despite being old and in white neighborhoods. Braun discussed how many of these homes were scavenged prior to destruction. Interview, Perkins with Braun.

project.⁴ Many homes were sacrificed. Their children were cut off from their school, and the community they had nourished for decades was completely fractured and disrupted. The homes in African American neighborhoods were not valued for their architecture or historical significance, and hence not considered worthy by those who had the power and skills to affect change. Their historic buildings were less appreciated by those able to exercise the levers of power. Their political connections were not strong enough to alter the route of the interstate project. Theirs was not the only minority community in Indianapolis forced to make a sacrifice for the “greater good”; black neighborhoods throughout the city were sacrificed because those in power did not value them. What was marketed as “urban development” usually served those who profited.

Because of systemic racism, minority communities in Indianapolis have been devalued over time and therefore left disproportionately vulnerable to federal interstate routes. They were vulnerable because the land they occupied was more valuable than their homes and neighborhoods. Also, they lacked the political clout to resist their neighborhoods from being redeveloped. This residence-segregating racism was manifest at all levels of society. The focus of this study is to examine how the construction of the interstate highway system in Indianapolis disproportionately impacted minority communities. Although this examination is relevant throughout Indianapolis, I will concentrate on the African American community, and more specifically, the community on the northwest side.⁵ It is my contention that, because of systemic racism, minority communities in Indianapolis have been devalued over time and, therefore, left

⁴ “Northsiders Lose Battle to Reroute Interstate Highway,” *Indianapolis Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), May 20, 1961, 1.

⁵ The author roughly defines these boundaries as 38th Street on the North, 21st Street on the South, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard on the West, and Illinois Street on the East.

disproportionally vulnerable to displacement as a result of routing federal interstate highways. They were vulnerable because their property was assessed less than surrounding land. Also, they lacked the political clout to resist urban development without benefits to their communities.

The story begins with one of the most important technological advancements in history, the automobile. There is no doubt it fundamentally changed the pattern of life in America and has forever impacted the way people live and work. It was heralded as a salvation from the horse drawn conveyances that dominated transportation at the time. Advocates of road construction came to understand the relationship between urban highways and urban housing and believed its introduction to be a possible remedy to citywide congestion.⁶ In the early 20th century, city life was often unhealthy. The streets were filled daily with horse manure and urine. Sanitation was primitive, garbage removal unreliable, waterways polluted and crime rampant. It was the responsibility of local governments, however, automobiles required better roads and, eventually, road construction became an issue debated, and largely financed, at the national level. Motor enthusiasts demanded roads that would allow them to travel without destroying their vehicles.⁷ Farmers desired more efficient ways to transport goods to market. The primitive dirt roads crisscrossing the nation were hard on the delicate new machines. Eventually, the desire to create an effective transportation system became a matter of

⁶ Raymond A. Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt” (Research Report, Poverty and Race Research Action Council, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2002), 4

⁷ Raymond A. Mohl, “The Interstates and the Cities: Highways, Housing, and the Freeway Revolt” (Research Report, Poverty and Race Research Action Council, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 2002), 4-6; Also, see Richard F Weingroff, “Federal Aid Road Act of 1916: Building the Foundation,” *U.S. Department of Transportation*, Vol. 60 No. 1 Summer 1996. <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/96summer/p96su2.cfm>.

national security so that goods and materials could be quickly transported throughout the nation. The result was that, in 1956, the largest public project in the history of America was initiated, the United States Interstate Highway System.

Decades before the outbreak of WWII, a vast highway system was viewed by many as a way to ease congestion and overcrowding in American cities. Visionaries, such as suburban real-estate developer William Levitt, widely viewed as the father of modern American suburbia, realized that America's adoption of the automobile could allow people to live further away from their places of work.⁸ Supporters of suburbanization envisioned an America whereby anyone could own a piece of property where he or she could breathe fresh air, have a patch of land, and become part of wholesome communities away from the daily grind of the city. The automobile could unleash the potential of those tethered to location. It allowed people to find employment further away from their homes. A robust highway system was perceived as vital to the expansion of the economy and the population growth of the nation.

After WWII, urban renewal projects exploded across the country; however, they were often greeted with suspicion by many afraid of the unintended consequences such projects would leave in their wake. In the 1940s, as minorities streamed north to fill vacant, largely factory, jobs left by those recruited into the War effort, cities strained to accommodate new arrivals who were often forced to live in dilapidated and overcrowded neighborhoods. Many cities were bursting at the seams and found it difficult to

⁸ William Levitt, with his family firm of Levitt and Sons, built a planned community in Long Island New York for returning WWII veterans. Opening in 1947, Levittown was the first truly mass-produced American suburb and is widely regarded as the archetype for postwar suburbs throughout the country.

accommodate the influx of so many new arrivals. A dependable transportation system was essential for those wanting to detach themselves from the hustle and bustle of the city. A reliable road network gradually became a national priority.

In 1919, a young U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel, Dwight D. Eisenhower, volunteered, on a whim, to join the first cross-country military convoy in U.S. history.

Approximately 80 military vehicles left Washington DC on July 9, 1919, bound for San Francisco. The journey was fraught with difficulty. Vehicles slid off embankments and bridges collapsed under the weight of the trucks and tanks. It was a



Picture 1: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1919
Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

rough journey, but in 62 days, the future president of United States entered San Francisco to jubilant crowds.⁹ Some twenty-five years later, as allied commander of the European theater in WWII, Eisenhower saw first-hand the advantages of the autobahn to the German armed forces and he wanted the U.S. to have its own network of highways. When he became president, Eisenhower had the political clout to make it happen.

The notion of an interstate highway system gained traction in the 1940s, but due to political infighting, legislation stalled. Congress had vigorous debates over how to construct a national roadway network, and each proposal was met with criticism, speculation, and political bickering over how it would be funded and implemented. After

⁹ Richard F. Weingroff, "Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956: Creating the Interstate System," *U.S. Department of Transportation*, Vol. 60 No. 1 Summer 1996, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/publications/publicroads/96summer/p96su10.cfm>.

finally settling the matter, in 1955 the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR) published a document entitled *General Location of National System of Interstate Highways*, commonly referred to as “*The Yellow Book*” because of the color of its cover. The *Yellow Book* included the initial design of the first 37,000 miles of interstate highways as well as new maps of 100 urban areas where roadways would be constructed. The BPR reviewed recommendations by individual states and worked with officials on planning roadwork for larger cities. The U.S. Congress finally obliged Eisenhower by passing the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 and, although Congress generally determined where the interstates would be placed and which urban centers would be linked, the decisions for the exact locations to build the new highway system was left up to individual states.¹⁰ The federal government would pay 90 percent of the cost and the states would make up the rest. The deal was so favorable to the states that even Indiana, generally not receptive of federal aid, was compelled to accept the terms.

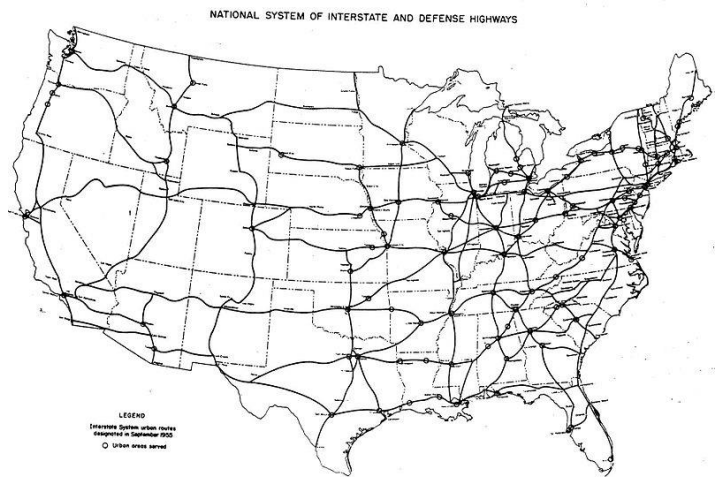
The legislation was bold and forward thinking, however, congressional efforts resulted in unintended consequences that significantly impacted where and how people lived. The automobile, coupled with the interstate system, shattered the barriers of distance. In *Crabgrass Frontier* (1985), Kenneth Jackson wrote, "Space around us - the physical organization of neighborhoods, roads, yards, houses, and apartments - sets up living patterns that condition our behavior." Supporters of the interstate highway system, mostly believing that it represented progress, rammed highways through the center of

¹⁰ Ibid.

cities, destroying many minority communities and allowing whites to flee cities, where they hoped to create neighborhoods in the suburbs that suited their cultural preferences.¹¹

The process for selecting land to purchase for the federal interstate system was often fraught with controversy. Determining the routes through farmland was much easier than assessing routes through urban areas, as it was easier to work with open land, (with few owners) than in the

established, populated areas of a constructed city (with many owners). The Indiana State Highway Commission engaged the Chicago engineering firm of H.W. Lochner to assess



potential routes for the federal interstate system through

Picture 2: National System of Interstate and Defense Highways
Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

Indianapolis.¹² As in most cities that accommodated interstate construction, the damage to city neighborhoods intersected by road construction was substantial: people were displaced from their homes, neighborhoods were bisected with concrete barriers and high

¹¹ Kenneth Jackson wrote this: "Suburbia has become the quintessential physical achievement of the United States; it is perhaps more representative of its culture than big automobiles, tall buildings, or professional football. Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness." Kenneth Jackson *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

¹² H.W. Lochner Inc. "Engineering Report" The State Highway Department of Indiana Chicago Ill, July 1957.

levels of noise, and communities were often destroyed beyond recovery.¹³ Renters had little notice and few options when the property owners sold out. Those who owned the property might profit from a bargain with the state, but the renters who occupied the property seldom benefited from the deal.

Lochner provided several viable options for the I-65 leg on the northwest side. Each option conformed to the criteria outlined in *The Yellow Book*. Lochner submitted its final recommendation to the Indiana State Board of Highways in July of 1957.¹⁴ Lochner recommend that the interstate should bisect the Black community of the Sixth Ward because acquiring properties there was less expensive than other options. Lochner consistently endorsed plans that enabled the acquisition of the lowest-valued real estate.¹⁵ By selecting land that was deemed cheap to acquire, the primary motive was ostensibly not racist but, in effect, it singled out minority communities and condemned them to destruction. Alternative, but not chosen, routes protected the communities of mostly white residents from the negative outcomes of highway construction and routing.¹⁶ Initially, Black settlers in Indianapolis could live throughout the city. However, by the

¹³ The installation of federal interstate I-70 significantly impacted the Jewish/African American community on the southside of Indianapolis. For a detailed analysis, see Susan Brin Hyatt, Benjamin J. Linder and Margaret Baurlev, *The Neighborhood of Saturdays: Memories of a Multi-Ethnic Community on Indianapolis' South Side*, (Indianapolis: Dog Ear Publishing, 2012).

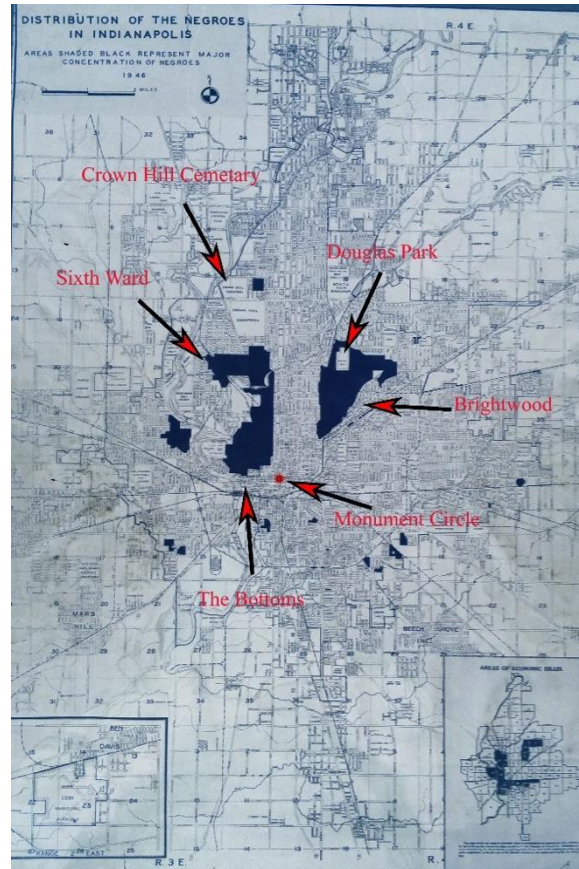
¹⁴ Four routes we considered viable. One of the routes would have gone directly south down Meridian Street. Despite affecting far fewer homes, the Meridian Street route was an unlikely possibility due to the great expense of the property. This may have been the basis of the story about Eli Lilly, Jr. saving the Morris Butler House.

¹⁵ The Lochner report relied on recommendations from an “independent real estate expert, one who is recognized as having broad experience and knowledge of the cost of property and improvements in the Indianapolis area” for determining property values. H.W. Lochner Inc. “Engineering Report” The State Highway Department of Indiana Chicago Ill, July 1957, 15.

¹⁶ For a detailed analysis of the various routes recommended in the Lochner report see *Indianapolis' Interstates: A Ten Year Review* Metropolitan Planning Commission of Marion County (1967). The report details the advantages and disadvantages of the routes selected as well as the alternate routes outlined in the Lochner report. It also analyses various routes proposed by several neighborhood organizations affected by the interstate construction. The State Highway Commission. chose the recommended routes in the Lochner report.

1960's, Indianapolis was a highly segregated city with regard to the residence of its citizens.

Following the Civil War, African Americans from the South began settling north of the Ohio River. At that time, Indianapolis was a relatively new city that welcomed all settlers. While most white Hoosiers did not support slavery, they did not subscribe to social equality and, generally considered whites superior to Blacks. In those early years, non-whites found housing throughout the city, but by the late 19th century, like the more prominent northern cities of Chicago and New York, Indianapolis began isolating its African American communities.¹⁷



Picture 3: Distribution of Negroes in Indianapolis, 1945
Photo courtesy of the Indiana State Library

Most northern cities restricted their Black population to a single neighborhood, but due to the relatively high percentage of Blacks in Indianapolis, three neighborhoods emerged as designated areas acceptable for African American residents.¹⁸ Two of the neighborhoods

¹⁷ More research into how the city began isolating its Black community would be useful. On Chicago, see Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 11-14. Regarding New York, see Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 17-35.

¹⁸ According to the 1910 census the percentage of African Americans in Indianapolis was 9.3% while in Chicago it was 2% and in New York it was 1.9%. See James J. Divita. Edited by David J Bodenhamer and Robert G. Barrows, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Indianapolis; Demography and Ethnicity*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 55.

were located northwest of downtown. The oldest, which was located along the canal, was referred to as The Bottoms, probably due to its lower elevation and susceptibility to flooding. The next neighborhood to emerge was just north of The Bottoms in the Sixth Ward alongside what is now Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard. The most recent Black neighborhood is on the east side near Douglas Park, in what is now present-day Brightwood.¹⁹ Constrained as they were, Black neighborhoods became overcrowded and described as ‘slums’ or ‘ghettos’. This lack of perceived value led to low property values and is ultimately what made them vulnerable to be determined as the “cheapest land” for acquisition when it came time to select routes for the new federal interstate system.

Indianapolis’ long history of de-facto segregation made it difficult for African Americans to improve their housing situations. For example, real estate developers introduced tactics to discourage integrated neighborhoods. Born in Indianapolis in 1925, Reginald Bruce was an over-achiever who took advantage of an excellent education at



Picture 4: Reginald Bruce

Photo courtesy of the
Indianapolis Recorder

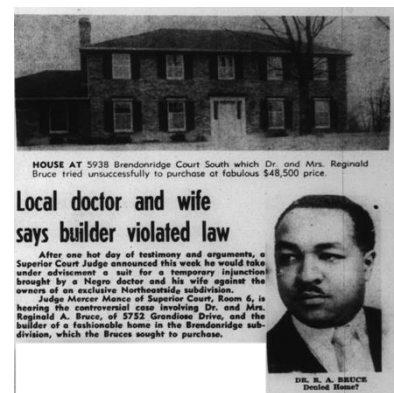
completing his residency, opened his own general practice in Indianapolis in 1954. He

Crispus Attucks High School, one of the premiere Black high schools in the country. At Attucks, Bruce was in the ROTC and after graduation in 1942 he was accepted into the U.S. Army Air Corps where he became a Tuskegee Airman, an elite, all-black unit of fighter pilots who fought with distinction during WWII. Following his stint as an aviator in WWII, Bruce returned to Indiana and enrolled in the medical training program at Indiana University. In 1952, he graduated and, after

¹⁹ By 1920 every ward contained some Black residents. Robert G. Barrows, “A Demographic Analysis of Indianapolis: 1870-1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1977), 120-124.

was, by most accounts, considered a successful man, the kind of person appreciated by the community. Despite his many accomplishments, Bruce had a difficult time finding housing outside of the designated areas allotted for African Americans in Indianapolis. Notwithstanding his many accomplishments, the racist system that dictated a large portion of his life would never fully accept his blackness. His contributions would never be enough. He was not fully accepted by the community that made the rules determining where he could live.

Reginald Bruce had been living with his parents on Edgemont Avenue on the northwest side, in the Sixth Ward, since 1947 when he and his first wife, Aurelia, began looking for a home of their own. In 1958, he submitted an offer to acquire a house on the northeast side. His check had been accepted and was being processed when the seller discovered that Bruce was Black and pulled out of the deal. That was typical. In 1960, he and his second wife, Mary, bought a house on Grandiose Drive in an area near what would later be referred to as the ‘Golden Ghetto’, a tribute/slur to the numerous professional African Americans who eventually moved into the area.²⁰ When the Bruce’s moved in, the area was still largely a white neighborhood and they were harassed, sometimes violently. In February 1961, Bruce spoke at the Indianapolis Jewish Community Center where he disclosed that, since moving in, his family had



Picture 5: Doctor Bruce
Photo courtesy of the Indianapolis Recorder

²⁰ The Golden Ghetto referred to the area around Augusta Way, per Dr. Paul Mullins’ email of 10/10/17 in possession of author. Dr. Mullins is a professor of archeology at Indiana University, Purdue University, Indianapolis. He has written and blogged extensively on the history of the urban environment of Indianapolis. The term “Golden Ghetto” had different interpretations.

been threatened repeatedly, including gunshots through their windows.²¹ Their neighbors made it clear that they were not welcome.

In January 1966, the family put their house on Grandiose Drive up for sale and they instructed their realtor to put down a \$1,000 deposit on a newly built home on Brendonridge Court near 53rd and Arlington on the Northeast side of the city. The Bruces did not quibble about the price, but rather offered what the builders asked. Their offer was accepted. However, the following day their realtor was notified by the builders, John E. and James P. Dugan, that the house had been sold. Bruce suspected that the Dugans found out he was Black (his wife Mary was white) and backed out of the deal. Bruce had had enough and filed a complaint with the Indiana Civil Rights Commission. But, the commission couldn't move fast enough, so on March 12th 1966, the Bruces filed a lawsuit against the Dugans, and Superior Court judge Mercer Mance (who was also an African American) granted an injunction that forbade the Dugans from selling the house until a hearing could be held. The Dugans filed a counter-complaint against the Bruces for \$20,000 in damages, causing the Bruces to withdraw their complaint in June 1966. They eventually purchased a house on North Illinois Street.²² The obstacles faced by the Bruces were common for African Americans at the time.

The challenges the Bruces and their African American neighbors in the community faced went back generations. Influenced by public concern over the treatment of Blacks after the Civil War, Congress passed legislation that attempted to address the racist agenda so ingrained in public practice. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 was the first

²¹ "Invitation for Negroes to Join Jewish Center Not Unanimous," *Indianapolis Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), February 4, 1961.

²² Paul Mullins, "Color and Conformity: Race and Integration in the Suburbs," *Archaeology and Material Culture*, accessed Nov. 12, 2017, <https://paulmullins.wordpress.com/>.

piece of federal legislation to define citizenship and to affirm that all citizens were equally protected under the law. This act made it illegal to deny any citizen the right to, “inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and personal property.”²³ However, the act did not provide a criminal penalty for those who violated the law. Individuals who suffered from such discrimination were left to find their own remedies in civil proceedings, most often in courts that favored judgements advantageous to whites and thereby adding another form of discrimination.

A century later, the Civil Rights Act of 1968 finally expanded on previous legislation and made it a crime to discriminate on the financing, rental, or sale of housing based on race.²⁴ The 1866 act provided for civil remedies against housing discrimination and the 1968 law provided criminal federal redress. It allowed for the prosecution of those who discriminated based on race.

The outcomes of decades of systemic racism evident in segregated residential patterns were poor infrastructure conditions and reduced property values in Black neighborhoods. When the time came to purchase property in Indianapolis to build a massive new roadway system, the Indiana State Highway Commission followed Lochner’s lead and targeted minority neighborhoods because their property was less expensive to acquire than that of white communities.

One organization that worked to address housing inequities in the Black community in Indianapolis was the Flanner House. In 1939, it studied the housing conditions in the Bottoms by interviewing 1,501 families and inquired about such things as lighting, toilets, heating, water supply, and overcrowding. The results of the survey

²³ *Civil Rights Act of 1866* 14 Statute 27-30 (1866).

²⁴ *Civil Rights Act of 1968*, Public Law 90-284, 82 Statute 73. (1968).

concluded that the neighborhood, which was overwhelming populated by African Americans, was among the worst areas in the city. It was overcrowded, under serviced and unsanitary.²⁵ The Flanner House was not alone in its assessment.

In 1941, the New Deal's Works Progress Administration conducted its own survey of the neighborhood. The survey concluded that 14 percent of the population, overwhelmingly renters, lived in substandard housing.²⁶ As they were renters, they had little incentive to improve their homes and property. Even if they could afford to move, they faced tremendous challenges by segregationist whites who denied them entry into other neighborhoods. This situation continued for decades without relief.

The housing problem in Indianapolis was common throughout the nation. In the 1930s, federal legislation was passed that attempted to alleviate congested cities by providing funds for states to build low-income housing units. However, the state of Indiana was reluctant to accept these funds because it was resistant to federal oversight. Hoosiers did not like another authority telling them what to do, and if Indiana accepted federal money, it would also be forced to accept the terms of that money. One of the strings attached to the federal money precluded racial bias, and Indiana was a very racist state, especially the further south one traveled.²⁷ Indianapolis embraced its well-established system of racism and it preferred to continue along that path. While other cities accepted the federal dollars that alleviated housing congestion, Indianapolis largely

²⁵ "Flanner House Records, 1936-1992," Indiana Historical Society, David L. Smith Collection, Collection #M0508, Box 30, Folder 1.

²⁶ United States, *Real property survey and low income housing survey of Indianapolis, Indiana*. (Indianapolis: City of Indianapolis, 1941), 42.

²⁷ Article 13 of the 1851 Indiana constitution states, "no negro or mulatto shall come into or settle in the State" Indiana. 1851, "Constitution of the state of Indiana".

chose to maintain the status quo.²⁸ The practice of refusing federal aid resulted in fewer options for Blacks to relocate throughout the city. As a result, they were forced to rent homes in far inferior condition than surrounding neighborhoods. Even if minorities could afford better homes, like the Bruces, some members of the community sought to deny them access to homes outside of the three neighborhoods.

One of the methods adopted by segregationists, throughout the nation, was to legislatively deny certain types of people from certain places. At the end of the 19th century, American cities began implementing zoning regulations. In 1899, Washington DC experimented with building height regulations. In 1908, Los Angeles passed the first city-wide 'use' regulations in an effort to separate industrial and residential areas.²⁹ Soon after, cities nationwide began passing ordinances that regulated land use within corporate city limits. It was not long before social reformers recognized the potential of using zoning ordinances to control land use towards social reform goals. "What began as a means of improving the blighted physical environment in which people lived and worked," wrote urban planner and historian Yale Rabin, became "a mechanism for protecting property values and excluding the undesirables," who were often defined as Jews, immigrants, and Blacks.³⁰

In 1926, the White People Protective League in Indianapolis sponsored a new law based on a recent New Orleans segregation ordinance restricting whites and Blacks from moving into neighborhoods predominantly occupied by those individuals of a different

²⁸ While the state of Indiana was reluctant to accept federal money for low income housing, there were exceptions. One example is Lockefield Gardens, the first public housing in Indianapolis. It was opened in 1938 and closed in 1976.

²⁹ June Manning Thomas, and Marsha Ritzdorf. *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997,) 24.

³⁰ Ibid, 24.

race. This ordinance differed in its language because it did not say outright that Blacks could not move into white neighborhoods, but rather that neither race could move into the neighborhood of the other. A legal precedent was exactly what segregationists needed. The Indianapolis Ordinance #15 was passed by the Indianapolis City Council and signed by Mayor John L. Duvall against the advice of his legal team, who advised him of its unconstitutionality. The mayor shook off the legal advice and signed it into law “firm in the belief that it meets with the approval of the great mass of our people, in the interest of peace and happiness.” Mayor Duvall may have been influenced the Ku Klux Klan, which wielded enormous power in Indiana during the 1920s. The power of the Klan in Indiana made such methods of intimidation and harassment possible. He knew the 1917 U.S. Supreme Court decision of *Buchanan v. Warley* rendered the ordinance impotent, but he supported it publicly and let the courts do the dirty work of striking it down.³¹

It became more difficult to discriminate against minorities legally by the 1960s, so de-facto discrimination took other forms and remained the norm. Whites resisted



Picture 6: Segregation

Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society

integration for many reasons, but the one most often advanced was that they feared that their property values would decline. To this end, organizations formed for the main

³¹ In 1917 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that prohibiting the sale of real property, on the basis of race, was in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. *Buchanan v. Warley* U.S. 60, 82 (1917). A 1926 ordinance passed by the Indianapolis City Council intended to “promote good order and general welfare” by separating white and Black residential communities. It created sanctions for whites moving into a “portion of the municipality inhabited principally by Negroes” and vice versa. It did not prohibit sale - just occupancy. It was struck down by the courts.” Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 61. Ordinance #15 and the mayor’s comments are found in Journal of the Common Council of the City of Indianapolis Indiana from January 1, 1926 to December 31, 1926 Published in Indianapolis, <https://www.scribd.com/document/248883828/Journal-of-the-Common-Council-of-the-City-of-Indianapolis-1926>.

purpose of prohibiting Black residents' entry into white communities. One such group was the Capital Avenue Protective Association, which resorted to intimidation and isolation to remove any Black residents who encroached into their neighborhoods. One of their maneuvers was to build 'spite' fences around Black properties. Spite fences were high fences or shrubs that surrounded a property on three sides, sending a message to the property owner that they were not welcome. Organizations such as these employed means of humiliation, violence and isolation to compel Black 'encroachers' to leave. Blacks would not be accepted by their neighbors and constant harassment would accompany their residence.³²

Another way in which Blacks were denied housing was through the use of racially restrictive covenants. Racial covenants were a response to the *Buchanan v. Warley* decision. Covenants impose specified duties and restrictions upon a property. These specifications are typically written into the property deed and usually stipulate penalties for violations that sometimes include the forfeiture of the property. It is common for covenants to "run with the land" whereby the terms of the covenant are conveyed to future buyers and sellers. Racially restrictive covenants typically prohibit particular groups of people from occupying a property. Although many minorities were the focus of racial covenants, African Americans were overwhelmingly targeted by this type of racism.³³ Following the Supreme Court decision, housing segregation was often conducted beyond the purview of legal oversight. A typical racial covenant included the following language,

³² For more on spite fences see Emma Lou Thornbrough. "Segregation in Indiana during the Klan Era of the 1920's." *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 4 (1961): 597. doi:10.2307/1889600.

³³ For more on racial covenants see Michael Jones Correa "The Origins and Diffusion of Racial Restrictive Covenants," *Political Science Quarterly* no. 4: 541 (2000).

“...hereafter no part of said property or any portion thereof shall be...occupied by any person not of the Caucasian race, it being intended hereby to restrict the use of said property...against occupancy as owners or tenants of any portion of said property for resident or other purposes by people of the Negro or Mongolian race.”³⁴

Although largely a thing of the past by the 21st century, racially restrictive covenants were once a useful tool for segregationists in that they denied minorities the ability to exercise their right to live where they pleased.³⁵

After the courts denied municipalities the legal authority to enact ordinances restricting where minorities could live, those individuals who supported segregated housing relied heavily on de-facto segregation similar to racially restrictive covenants. Ironically, the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) had become one of their biggest allies when, on June 13, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) signed into law the Home Owners Loan Corporation Act (HOLC) which, at the time, was among the most impactful pieces of legislation in U.S. history. It made it easier for Americans to borrow money to refinance homes on the verge of default because the loans were backed by the federal government. At that time, the U.S. economy was in freefall and in the throes of the Great Depression. At the height of its popularity, nearly 40 percent of eligible Americans availed themselves of assistance under this program.³⁶ It was hugely successful for those individuals who qualified, but it did not apply equally to minorities.

³⁴ This example of language within a racially restrictive covenant is often quoted. I have so far been unable to verify its antecedent.

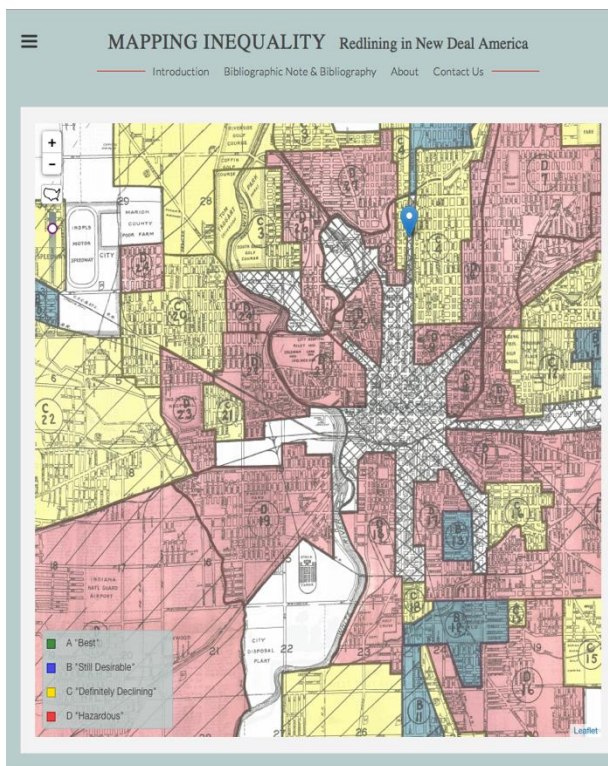
³⁵ A spite fence was erected around the north Capital Avenue house of a Black dentist who sued to have it removed. For more on spite fences see Emma Lou Thornbrough. “Segregation in Indiana During the Klan Era of the 1920's.” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 4 (1961): 597. doi:10.2307/1889600.

³⁶ Historical Injustice in the Urban Environment: The Ecological Implications of Residential Segregation in Indianapolis, “*Indiana Legal Archive*,” Accessed October 10, 2017, <http://www.indianalegalarchive.com/ej-case-study/>.

In order to determine the values of properties for mortgage-lending, the FHA appraisers divided cities into neighborhoods and evaluated those neighborhoods based on several factors. The FHA collected data, including the type of construction and age of the houses as well as their general condition. They also gathered information about the residents including their income, jobs, ages, and ethnicity. Based on this evidence, the FHA produced a map that categorized communities in terms of economic stability. They created an A to D rating system whereby each neighborhood was designated with a letter

and color. The A (green) neighborhoods were categorized as being the most desirable while the D (red) areas were depicted as undesirable. For decades, this map was heavily used by mortgage lenders when considering loan applications.

In order to regulate the mortgage terms, the FHA produced the *Underwriting Manual*, which was based on its neighborhood appraisal system. The manual emphasized



Picture 7: FHA "Redlining" Map, 1939

Photo courtesy of the Indiana Historical Society

stability. For example, it stated that, “if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes.”³⁷ Under the section entitled, “Special Considerations in Rating Underdeveloped

³⁷ Race was a central element to the FHA policies. Other quotes from the underwriters manual include, “usually the protection against adverse influences afforded by these means include [the] prevention

Subdivisions and Partially Developed Residential Areas”, the FHA included a provision that, “prohibited the occupancy of properties except by the race for which they were intended.” In Indianapolis, an overwhelming majority of Black residents resided in the D areas. No Blacks lived in any A areas.³⁸ It quickly became an industry norm to follow the FHA guidelines, which, in turn, had a strong impact on private mortgage lending. Thus, banks were unable to make federally backed loans in neighborhoods with a C or D rating. No question exists that the *Underwriting Manual* had a profound impact on lending policy until at least the late 1960s. The result was that neighborhoods designated with a lower rating were far less likely to be considered investable, and even allowing someone of a different race into a higher ranked community diminished that community. The system not only encouraged segregation, it encouraged residential segregation and negatively impacted African American home ownership and the ability to build intergenerational equity. For many Americans, home ownership is the primary vehicle for wealth acquisition. For those unable to participate in home ownership, or invest in their homes, their opportunities for wealth attainment are limited artificially. Furthermore, without property to pass on, the next generation is deprived of advantages exercised in the white community.

of the infiltration of business and industrial uses, lower-class occupancy, and inharmonious racial groups;” “If a neighborhood is to retain stability it is necessary that [the] properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes;” “thus, although physical surrounds of a neighborhood area may be favorable and conducive to enjoyable, pleasant living in its locations, if the children of people living in such an area are compelled to attend school where the majority or a goodly number of the pupils represent a far lower level of society or an incompatible racial element, [then] the neighborhood under consideration will prove far less stable and desirable than if this condition did not exist.” Federal Housing Administration, *Underwriting Manual: Underwriting and Valuation Procedure Under Title II of the National Housing Act with Revisions to April 1, 1936* (Washington, D.C.), Part II, Section 2, Rating of Location, <http://wbhsi.net/~wendyplotkin/DeedsWeb/fha36.html>.

³⁸ Richard B. Pierce, *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005, 63.

Another example of how the federal government denied Blacks access to opportunities is revealed in the way it implemented the G.I. Bill. Passed in 1944, the federal government enacted the G.I. Bill to recognize the sacrifice of soldiers by providing extraordinary benefits to veterans. Under the G.I. Bill veterans could get a free college education and a government insured loan to purchase a home. However, lenders routinely denied loans to African Americans. Of the first 67,000 loans issued, less than 100 were provided to non-whites.³⁹ Coupled with racist tradition, there was little chance Black veterans would be the recipients of a G.I. Loan. As a result, they were denied the same opportunities as whites to live where they wanted.

Many of the individuals affected by the construction of the federal interstate system were not notified they would have to move until it was too late to do anything about it. Most were renters, and therefore, had little voice in the sale of the property. However, they still banded together to fight the onslaught of what historian and author Martin Anderson refers to as the 'federal bulldozer'.⁴⁰ In 1967, a group of residents from the Sixth Ward supported an alternate route that would raze only 100 'living units' vs the 500 units (mostly of lower and middle class) that would be destroyed by the existing highway proposal. Hearings were held, but it was too late, the state had already purchased 75% of the property.⁴¹ A point came when the people accepted that there was little they could do to alter the course of the federal interstate project. The land their

³⁹ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-century America*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005, 146.

⁴⁰ Martin Anderson. *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949-1962*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1964.

⁴¹ *Indianapolis' Interstates: A Ten Year Review* Metropolitan Planning Commission of Marion County (1967).

community occupied for generations suddenly became desirable by white people and there was nothing they could do to dissuade them from acquiring it.

If nothing could be done to save their communities, maybe more could be done to compensate those displaced. Interstate planning in Indianapolis had been ongoing for nearly a decade when in 1966, Andrew Jacobs Jr., a U.S. congressman from Indiana, submitted legislation to the U.S. Congress intended to provide relief for those individuals relocated by the construction of the interstate system. The bill not only called for a fair price for their properties, but compensation that would allow them to relocate into a situation similar to what they were forced to abandon in the name of “progress.” Jacobs entitled his bill “Homes Before Highways.” Jacobs was a rising star in Congress and a strong Civil Rights advocate. The bill he championed was intended to alleviate some of the hardships faced by those obliged to move due to urban development projects such as the construction of the interstate highway system. Among other things it “would prohibit the acquisition of land or construction of public works until adequate and comparable replacement homes and churches are available to the displaced.”⁴² The city largely selected minority neighborhoods because they were the most “blighted” and their property the cheapest to acquire. However, decades of segregation restricted where the “displaced” could relocate. Jacobs forwarded his bill in an attempt to ease the transition.

Many supported Jacobs’ bill, including Marion County Democratic party chairman James Beatty, Rev. Andrew Brown, and Rev. Mozel Sanders. They were substantial community leaders and were firsthand observers of the chaos the establishment of the federal interstate system inflicted. Like leaders in many cities across

⁴² “City’s Negroes Told to Spring from Ghettos,” *Indianapolis Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), June 18, 1966, 1.

the nation likewise disrupted, they established an organization to redress decisions made at a higher level. Their goals were expressed in a 1966 article in the *Indianapolis Recorder*: “to protect the rights of [the] elderly and undereducated Negroes who are, it has been charged, being exploited by shady real estate dealers and fly-by-night landlords and coerced by university and highway officials.”⁴³ Homes Before Highways was a grassroots movement whose members believed that marginalized people were excessively sacrificed on behalf of the majority.

Although its impact proved to be minimal, Homes Before Highways protested in several ways. In 1966, for instance, the group’s resistance to an elevated highway wall was reflected in a ‘selective buying campaign’ against downtown businesses that would continue until “the establishment in the downtown area recognizes that when they wall themselves in, they also wall their customers out.”⁴⁴ Their assertive style was somewhat uncommon for African Americans in Indianapolis, who generally believed that they could better achieve their goals from working within the system.⁴⁵

As 1966 wound down, Homes Before Highways wound down as well, but its legacy continued. On February 22, 1967, *The Indianapolis Star* credited Homes Before Highways with being at least partly responsible for the passing of Indiana House Bill 1347 in 1967, which increased relocation payments to \$5,000 over ‘fair market value’ as well as “relocation assistance including loans of up to \$2,500, for persons or businesses

⁴³ “Gov. Moves to Satisfy HBH Demands,” *Indianapolis Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), September 17, 1966.

⁴⁴ “Selective Buying Campaign Against Downtown Businesses,” *Indianapolis Recorder* (Indianapolis, IN), December 10, 1966.

⁴⁵ The African American community in Indianapolis was relatively reluctant to provoke attention. Per an argument forwarded by Richard Pierce, African American’s tended to trust that the system would benefit them more than resistance would. Richard Pierce’s *Polite Protest: The Political Economy of Race in Indianapolis, 1920-1970*.

displaced by interstate highway construction.”⁴⁶ The passage of this bill represented a significant achievement for Homes Before Highways, but the group accused the State Highway Commission of attempting to remove residents before the law went into effect on July 1, 1967. Following its legislative success in 1967, Homes Before Highways essentially disappeared in print and appears to have been a less prominent public voice. Homes Before Highways, and resistance organizations like it, did little to amend the course of the federal interstate system. The few successes of these organizations are primarily notable for their exceptionalism.

⁴⁶ “Measure Hiking Payments to Displaced OK’d” *Indianapolis Star*, (Indianapolis, IN) Feb. 22, 1967.

Conclusion

In the spring of 2016, my anthropology professor suggested that the placement of the interstate system in Indianapolis was the result of racism. Dr. Paul Mullins admitted that he did not have any proof to back up his statement, but it was his contention that state and city officials used the interstate as an excuse to clear out blighted minority neighborhoods. I considered his position and set about investigating *why* minority communities were disproportionately disrupted as a result of interstate highway planning, construction, and routing. It is evident that the goal of acquiring the necessary land as cheaply as possible translated, in effect, into a form of racial discrimination. Decades of systemic inequality, cemented by an overtly racist society, left Black communities vulnerable. Up until the late 1960s it was very difficult for African Americans to find housing outside of three designated neighborhoods in Indianapolis and, by constraining them to small geographic areas, those neighborhoods became overcrowded and blighted. They were also neglected by the city that failed to provide the infrastructure and services that white neighborhoods received.

The isolation of Blacks into designated areas was done through means both de-jure and de-facto. Federal policies and practices had a tremendous influence on how racial segregation was implemented at the local level. The state of Indiana and the city of Indianapolis adopted policies and passed laws designed to separate the races. Some legal, some not. Communities organized to keep out minorities. Fighting segregation was like a game of Whack-A-Mole, as soon as one problem was addressed, another would pop up.

The odds were stacked against minorities at every level of society. The federal government released the *Underwriting Manual*, which encouraged segregation and

discouraged investment in minority communities. The city was reluctant to accept federal money for low income housing and passed laws designed to restrict African Americans from integrating into white neighborhoods. Realtors were reluctant to show African Americans homes in white neighborhoods and banks were reluctant to give loans to Blacks, even if they were qualified. Property covenants often forbade the rental or sale to Blacks. Even if a Black family were to gain entry into a white neighborhood, their neighbors often banded together to encourage their departure. Neighborhood organizations were formed for the sole purpose of keeping Blacks out. By the time the interstate system came along, many minority neighborhoods were considered slums and hence worthless. These properties were assessed as less valuable compared to those of the white communities surrounding them. The state justified its selection of the destruction of those neighborhoods in order to build the interstate on the grounds of cost, disregarding or indifferent to the effect the new highways would have on the neighborhoods.

Although this examination focuses on the African American community on the northwest side of Indianapolis, other communities in Indianapolis and throughout the country were treated similarly. Period reports document the hardships faced in many communities impacted by the construction of interstate highways, but there was little that could be done. For many who only viewed black neighborhoods as slums, the construction of the interstate was a convenient device to eliminate blighted areas. Most of those displaced by interstate construction were poor and without voice or political influence. They were usually renters who did not equally benefit from the suburban development that their white neighbors sought. Future research might explore who most profited from interstate construction: Lawyers certainly benefited from the turmoil that

the need to acquire land for the interstates created; construction companies, realtors, and landlords profited; new suburbanites profited. What happened in Indianapolis was typical; throughout the nation the installation of the federal interstate system disproportionately impacted urban minority communities. There were many who were improved through the construction of the interstate system in Indianapolis. The people who benefited the least were the minorities obliged to bear the greatest burden.

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